



A Study of *Love Medicine* Based on Herman's Theory

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Abstract— In her representative work *Love Medicine*, American Indian female writer Louise Erdrick uses a polyphonic narrative structure to construct a narrative space with diverse dialogues, allowing Indian characters of different identities to narrate their traumatic experiences. This paper is based on Judith Herman's theory of trauma and recovery, combined with the historical and current challenges faced by Native American reservation residents in the novel, to analyze the interweaving and composite presentation of personal trauma, war trauma, and cultural trauma in the work. Through polyphonic narrative strategy, Erdrick not only breaks the traditional linear trauma writing mode, but also transforms traumatic memories into narrative dynamics for cultural identity reconstruction. This paper further explores how the Native American characters in *Love Medicine* gradually achieve psychological and social trauma recovery by returning to cultural roots, coordinating the tension between tradition and modernity, and completing cultural redemption for individuals and ethnic groups through the three stages of trauma recovery proposed by Herman, safety establishment, mourning, and reconstruction connection.



Keywords— *Love Medicine*, Judith Herman, trauma recovery

Louise Erdrick is a highly influential Native American female writer in contemporary American literature. She is one of the representative writers of the Second Wave of the Native American Renaissance as well. Kenneth Lincoln once highly praised the literary achievements of *Love Medicine*, pointing out that its number of awards is extremely prominent in contemporary American Indian literature^[1]. *Love Medicine* consists of 18 intertextual short stories, showcasing the lives of several generations of Native American Chippewa and the legendary stories of the North Dakota family on the reservation site through unique narrative structures and rich cultural connotations. The novel depicts conflicts between Native American tribal culture and White Americans colonial culture, revealing the cultural trauma of traditional tribes, the war trauma left by the Vietnam War on conscripted Native

Americans, and the trauma faced by Chippewa individuals.

Since the 1990s, trauma research has gradually shifted from a single research framework in psychology to humanities and social sciences such as literature and history, forming a new interdisciplinary research paradigm. Judith Herman constructed a three-stage model of security review, mourning reconstruction, the sense of connection in *Trauma and Recovery*, providing a theoretical framework for analyzing literary trauma narratives. *Love Medicine* constructs a 50 year traumatic memory map of the Chippewa tribe through multiple intertextual short stories. Existing research mostly focuses on postcolonialism, feminism, and ecocriticism. This paper applies Herman's theory and combines it with the cultural context of indigenous peoples to reveal the cultural and political significance of trauma writing in the novel.

1. The complex presentation of trauma

1.1 Personal trauma: physical violence and identity rupture

Herman proposed that traumatic events cause people to doubt basic interpersonal relationships. Tearing apart the attachment relationships of family, friends, and community, destroying the belief system that gives meaning to human experience, violating the victim's belief in the laws of nature or God's will, and plunging the victim into an abyss full of survival crisis. In the novel, Joan Kashpa's biological father abandoned their mother, daughter and fled to the Twin Cities. Her mother was an alcoholic and they mostly lived in the forest. Joan was found frozen several times in outdoor toilets, ditches, and monastery stairs. After her mother passed away in the forest, Joan survived on grass and pine sap. She ate the new shoots of grass like a deer, as if she were the daughter of nature. Joan's charming appearance earned her the reputation of Miss American Indian. Despite this, Joan showed indifference towards death from a young age^[2]. Not long after she was adopted by Aunt Mary, she seduced Gaudi and Orilia into playing the game of hanging people with her. She incited them to hang her with a rope, thinking that she could end her own life, but Aunt Mary saved her at a critical moment. This not only failed to make Joan grateful, but also used dirty words to insult her aunt. Joan's childhood was a series of abuse and abandonment, which had a great impact on her life. Judith Herman believed that repeated trauma in adult life can erode the already formed personality structure, but repeated trauma in childhood can form and deform personality.

Herman emphasized that many symptoms of post-traumatic stress can be classified into three main categories: excessive alertness, memory intrusion, and confinement and timidity. Due to her Native American identity, Joan endured extreme poverty and prolonged mental torment in the city of Williston. Her frequent job changes were essentially a defensive response to the harassment and discrimination of white customers, demonstrating her long-term state of excessive vigilance.

Before being adopted by Aunt Mary, Joan's experiences of being frozen outdoors in winter, eating grass and pine sap became her lifelong psychological ghosts. As an adult, she went several days without food in

Williston due to lack of money. These experiences led her to see the Easter egg in the hands of a white man on Easter Sunday, as if seeing a lighthouse, attracting her to approach White American man^[3]. He peeled many Easter eggs, repeatedly triggering Joan's childhood memories, flashback directly causing her to fall into a state of mental confusion, and even creating the illusion of her own skin being fragile like an eggshell.

Joan's social pattern presents the characteristics of confinement and timidity. She refuses to establish deep connections with Native Americans living on the reservation. Her interactions with White Americans are only for the purpose of earning a living. Her abandonment of her son Lipsha pushes this behavior to the extreme^[4]. This emotional isolation is a typical manifestation of confinement and timidity in Herman's theory, as Joan strives to cut off all social networks to protect herself from secondary harm.

The blizzard on the day of Joan's death is both a reality and a symbol of her traumatic memories. The economic oppression, and identity denial that Joan suffered in White Americans world consumes her will to survive like a blizzard, destroying her foundation for survival. Herman advocates that perpetrators of systemic trauma often adopt strategies such as secrecy, stigmatization, and denial, pushing victims into the abyss of isolation and helplessness. Joan's death is the ultimate result of racial violence.

1.2 War trauma: historical violence and memory ghosts

In Louise Erdrick's *Love Medicine*, the traumatic process of Henry's character forms a profound intertextuality with Judith Herman's theory of trauma recovery^[5]. The chapter, through the identification of Henry's eyes by Vietnamese women, tears open the traumatic cracks in the identity of Native Americans under White Americans colonial violence system, while Henry's final self-inflicted ending confirms Herman's core assertion that structural trauma cannot be resolved through individual efforts.

Herman points out that the core characteristics of traumatic events are extremely scary, helplessness, loss of control, and the threat of destruction. Henry's trauma did not stem from a single violent event, but rather from the systematic cultural genocide of Native Americans by

White Americans colonial system. In the novel, White Americans use nose pointing to presuppose Henry and Red Tomahawk as tools for cannibalism. This symbolic use of bodily features is essentially a racist practice of reducing Native Americans to biological specimens^[6]. When Henry was sent to interrogate Vietnamese women, White Americans gave him a fictional identity as the inheritor of ancient interrogation techniques, which completely shattered Henry's self-defense system.

The identification of Vietnamese women became a key scene that triggered Henry's traumatic memory. This identification not only exposed the violent logic of White Americans scapegoating people of color for each other, but also forced Henry to face a cruel truth. The war he participated in was essentially a replay of White Americans colonial history, and he himself was just a link in the chain of historical violence. This awakening to the essence of collective violence led Henry to what Herman called a shattered sense of self, he was unable to identify with the executioner identity bestowed upon him by White Americans, nor could he return to his Native American identity as a stripped cultural subject, ultimately becoming a rootless spirit. The Vietnam War not only inflicted severe psychological trauma on Henry, but also left indelible marks on his body. The shrapnel left deep inside the body moved to the surface of the skin over time, suggesting that Henry's traumatic memories were infiltrating from the subconscious to the conscious level. The physical existence of durian shrapnel has become a tangible symbol of traumatic memory^[7]. When the security alarm sounds, it was not only the exposure of body metal, but also a public warning of soul trauma.

The fragile structure constructed by Henry with three knives and two cups is a typical dissociative defense mechanism. Herman pointed out that trauma survivors often rebuild their sense of control over their environment through repetitive actions such as compulsive behavior or symbolic rituals such as building objects. The sharpness of the knife and the fragility of the cup create tension, implying that Henry attempted to tame his inner turmoil with dangerous tools, but was unable to heal the psychological rift. Henry's construction behavior in the bar is similar to the soul bridge in Indian shamanic rituals, but his bridge leads to nothingness, implying the unreachable

nature of trauma recovery^[8]. This magical setting precisely reflects the cruel truth of Herman's theory that restoration is a lifelong process.

Henry's story reveals a cruel fact, when trauma becomes a dual imprint of body and culture, recovery is no longer a linear process, but an endless struggle. Through this role, Erdrick pushes Herman's theory from clinical psychology to a broader context of ethnic trauma. Henry's durian shrapnel is also a cultural fragment left over from the colonial history of the entire Indian nation.

1.3 Cultural trauma: language extinction and ritual disintegration

Herman's theory states that traumatic events firstly destroy an individual's sense of security, causing them to fall into a contradictory state of excessive alertness and confinement. Nicot's experience at the Flemish School is essentially a systematic detachment of cultural language and identity. The school, as a tool of white cultural hegemony, dismantled Native American languages, traditional rituals, and self-awareness through forced assimilation education. This deprivation led to Nicot's hopeful performance in the West after graduation, but he fell into a more brutal symbolization dilemma. He was forced to play the role of an Indian who was about to die in the play, a character setting that directly reflected Herman's mention of post-traumatic memory invasion: American society compressed the collective memory of Native Americans into a single symbol of death, making Nicot a living carrier of cultural trauma.

More profoundly, the plot of American women buying Nicot as a nude model for \$200 pushes cultural exploitation to the extreme. This behavior is not only the objectification of the individual's body, but also a complete denial of the dignity of Indian culture^[9]. Nicot's Jumping portrait has become a cultural fast-moving consumer under American consumerism. Herman emphasizes that trauma victims can be trapped in confinement and fear due to a shattered sense of self, which is exactly what Nicot's state is at that time. He tries to integrate into White Americans world through performance, but finds himself just a puppet of death symbols. This cognition gradually causes him to lose trust in his own cultural value.

Herman points out that the core of traumatic events is the loss of autonomy and disconnection. Lipsha's magical

touch ability was originally an important symbol of his ethnic identity, but when he attempted to use frozen turkey hearts instead of traditional black goose hearts to make love medicine, this behavior directly led to the death of his grandfather Nicot. This plot coincides with Herman's description of sustained trauma. When Lipsha discovers the absurd reality of frozen chicken hearts impersonating love drugs, he is actually experiencing a systemic failure of cultural rituals. Traditional pharmacists must communicate with the souls of their ancestors through the heart of a black goose, and the industrial nature of frozen food completely dissolves this sacredness. As Herman said, trauma destroys people's sense of security in normal life, and Lipsha's inability to touch is a physiological manifestation of the collapse of cultural security.

It is worth noting that when Lipsha was young and restless, he chose churches instead of tribal holy sites to seek peace. This contradictory behavior reveals a deeper cultural trauma. When American religion occupies the Native spiritual space, they are no longer able to obtain psychological safety through their own ethnic rituals. Herman emphasized that healing relationships are a key factor in recovery. The brief peace that Lipsha gained in the church precisely highlighted his broken connection with his own culture^[10]. He attempted to find a safe base in a heterogeneous culture, but ultimately fell deeper into identity loss.

The plot arrangement of Nicot and Lipsha profoundly reveals the paradox of cultural trauma recovery. On the one hand, individuals must repair their trauma by returning to the cultural community. On the other hand, the survival of cultural communities is itself threatened by traumatic forces. Herman's theory provides a framework for understanding this paradox, positing that restoration lies not in forgetting trauma, but in acknowledging it, mourning the loss, rebuilding connections, and ultimately achieving a reconfirmation of cultural sovereignty. This process finds its literary manifestation in Nicot's journey back home and the restoration of Lipsha's magical touch ability. The individual's struggle reflects the survival dilemma of the entire Indian culture under colonial violence, and also declares the possibility of cultural trauma recovery in a returning posture.

2. Multi-voice reconstruction strategy for trauma

narrative

2.1 Circular narrative: breaking the linear view of time

Herman profoundly points out in trauma theory that traumatic memories are not stored in the brain in the form of complete narratives, but are dispersed in neural circuits in the form of sensory fragments, including nonverbal symbols such as visual afterimages, bodily pain, and emotional flashbacks. This fragmented storage mechanism directly leads to the rupture and distortion of time perception among trauma survivors. The boundary between the past and present is blurred, dangerous situations are eternal, and safety experiences are compressed into fleeting fragments. The circular narrative structure adopted by Louise Erdrick in *Love Medicine* is precisely a literary presentation of this neurocognitive mechanism. The novel unfolds the narrative starting from the death of Joan Morrissey, and through the cross recollection of six narrators Lipsha, Mary, Lulu, Joan, Lehmann, Albertineine, breaks down the same event into sensory fragments from different perspectives, ultimately piecing together a non-linear trauma map.

More noteworthy is that the novel further reveals the subjectively reconstructive nature of traumatic memory through the cognitive differences between narrators. For example, Lipsha possesses magical touch ability. His memory focuses on the physical details of frozen turkey heart leading to grandfather's death, which reinforces his sense of guilt through embodied memory. As the guardian of traditional beliefs, Mary transforms trauma into an opportunity for intergenerational connection through the ritual memory of prayer bead transmission. This split in narrative perspective corresponds precisely to the theory of memory plasticity in neuroscience, where traumatic memory is not a fixed, unchanging neural imprint, but is reencoded every time it is recalled based on the current context and emotional state. Through the structural innovation of circular narrative, *Love Medicine* not only allows readers to intuitively feel the reshaping of cognitive structure caused by trauma, but also implies the possibility of healing^[11]. When the fragmented memories of the six narrators finally achieve some metaphorical integration in the symbolic system of *Love Medicine*, readers also experience an empathetic journey from neural dissociation to cognitive reconstruction. This may be the ultimate

intention of Erdrick as a master of trauma literature: to allow readers to prepractice the neural mechanisms of trauma recovery through narrative experiments in literary experiences.

2.2 Polyphonic dialogue: deconstructing single trauma narratives

Bakhtin's polyphonic theory achieves a creative transformation with strong local cultural characteristics in *Love Medicine*. Its core lies in deconstructing the monopoly of a single authoritative narrative on traumatic experiences through the juxtaposition and dialogue of multiple subjects. In the novel, Mary Kapshaw's pragmatic philosophy of survival, Lipshaw's identity confusion and spiritual dispersal, and Henry Martin's war memories, silent traumas together form a polyphonic, non-hierarchical narrative symphony. Each character speaks out as an independent thought subject, refusing to be included in any unified trauma interpretation framework. This narrative democratization reaches its climax in the chapter of Jumping. When Mary uses the daily ritual of peeling potatoes to confront the psychological trauma caused by her husband's infidelity, the mechanical repetition of her actions and the imagery of potato peel peeling off are both physical stripping of traumatic memories and metaphorical repair of cultural fractures.

Bakhtin emphasized the incompleteness and openness of polyphonic novels, which is transformed into a subversive practice of trauma writing in *Love Medicine*. Mary's rustling sound of blades rubbing against potatoes, industrial noise of trains roaring outside the window form a vocal counterpoint when peeling potatoes, implying the eternal struggle between traditional life rhythm and modern impact. Her action of neatly stacking the sliced potatoes into the enamel pot is similar to the concretization of the safe base in Herman's trauma recovery theory. Reconstructing a sense of control over daily life through repetitive labor, and deconstructing and reconstructing traumatic events in a cycle^[12]. This resilience in ordinariness forms a profound intertextuality with Herman's proposal to restore a sense of security through daily rituals, but the breakthrough of *Love Medicine* is that Mary's establishment of security is not a forgetting of trauma, but a stubborn adherence to cultural memory

wrapped in a pragmatic shell by transforming painful experiences into survival strategies.

The democratization of narrative in novels directly challenges the binary opposition of victim savior in mainstream trauma narratives. When Mary discovered that her husband was cheating, she didn't choose to cry or seek revenge. Instead, she digested the pain by increasing the number of mashed potatoes and making them extra delicate. This silent resistance echoes across chapters with Henry Martin's survival strategy of lifelong silence after war trauma, both refusing to be observed and interpreted as trauma objects, but redefining the meaning of trauma in a subjective manner^[13]. The clamor advocated by Bakhtin is transformed into diverse expressions of cultural trauma. Mary's pragmatism, Lipsha's spiritual exploration, and Henry Martin's silent watch, collectively constituting a negative declaration of a single trauma interpretation.

3. The recovery path of trauma: the tension between cultural tradition and modernity

3.1 The healing function of traditional rituals

Herman emphasizes in *Trauma and Recovery* that the primary condition for trauma recovery is to establish a dual sense of security at both the physical and psychological levels. Mary suffered physical torture and mental humiliation from Leopold in the monastery, which was essentially a systematic violence of American religion against the Native Indian culture. This violence led to Mary's typical post-traumatic stress response. She compared Leopold to a black fish and herself as bait, a poetic imagery suggesting her long-term fear of being preyed upon. In Mary's hallucinations, scenes of Leopold's visceral transformation into dust repeatedly appear. Dust is a concrete representation of traumatic memories. It is also a metaphor for the dust to dust view of life and death in Native Indian culture. Mary once attempted to numb her pain by self deprecatingly cutting off a shroud, but ultimately awakened in the Scar incident forged by Leopold.

Mary achieved the reconstruction of a sense of security by actively restructuring the narrative. When the nuns misinterpreted her scars as divine marks, she realized that it was Leopold's lie of exoneration, thus denying the Christian narrative's right to interpret her own trauma. She fantasized about her saint statue being made of pure gold,

with lips set in rubies and toes made of pink shells, which symbolize female fertility in Native American culture. This imagery blended Christian saint symbols with local religious elements, declaring the inalienable nature of its cultural subject. Mary ultimately escaped from the monastery, symbolizing a complete rejection of the oppressive environment. Herman points out that detachment from the source of trauma is a prerequisite for recovery, and Mary's actions confirm this.

The plot of Mary relying on Indian talismans during each delivery perfectly fits Herman's proposed restoration mechanism of reconstructing self narrative through cultural practice. Childbirth, as the most vulnerable moment in a woman's life, was endowed with sacredness in Indian culture. Talismans were passed down by ancient Native American families, implying intergenerational transmission and healing of cultural trauma^[14]. When Rush Bell condemned her son's disregard for Mary's childbirth, she was not only defending her daughter-in-law's rights, but also reaffirming the values of female fertility is sacred and inviolable in Indian culture. Mary gave birth smoothly under the protection of a talisman. This successful experience helped her regain a sense of control over her body. Herman emphasized that trauma can destroy an individual's self-efficacy beliefs, and cultural rituals helped survivors rebuild their control over life by providing replicable success templates.

Mary achieved psychological decolonization in the monastery by rejecting Christian narratives, and achieved bodily autonomy during childbirth through talismans^[15], both of which together constitute her transformation from a traumatic object to an active subject. Indian talismans, as a living tradition, were in stark contrast to Christian death violence. When Mary incorporated seashells into the saint's imagination, she was actually creating a mixed cultural identity that acknowledges traumatic history and achieved transcendence through cultural innovation. Mary eventually became a defender of tradition, forming an alliance with Lulu Nanapush to fight against White Americans factory project, marking the upgrade of her recovery process from individual healing to collective action^[16]. Herman points out that the highest stage of recovery for trauma survivors is self redemption through helping others, and Mary's transformation is a literary

reflection of this theory.

3.2 The Individual's Negotiation in Modern Context: Between Isolation and Reconnection

Judith Herman's theory posits that trauma recovery fundamentally occurs within a relational context, requiring the survivor to rebuild connections to self and community. This section explores how the characters in *Love Medicine*, while often situated within a fragmented modern landscape of geographical displacement, urban migration, and fractured kinship, engage in a profound negotiation between modern individual existence and the imperative for communal healing. Their journeys manifest not as a simple return to tradition, but as fraught, creative attempts to forge new pathways to reconnection.

The modern context in the novel often amplifies trauma through isolation and dislocation. Characters like Albertineine Johnson, who leaves the reservation for nursing school and city life, embody this tension. Her healing cannot solely rely on communal rituals back home. Instead, she navigates a hybrid space. Her medical training represents a modern system of knowledge, yet her empathetic care for the dying, a form of witnessing and providing comfort, can be read as an individualized, modern analogue to traditional acts of community stewardship. Similarly, Lipsha Morrissey's journey from his failed, misunderstood use of touch to his eventual search for identity and purpose, illustrates an individual grappling with inherited spiritual roles in a world that no longer universally believes in them. His ultimate path suggests that the reconfirmation of cultural sovereignty may involve personal quests and the adaptation of traditional purposes to contemporary, personal circumstances.

Louise Erdrich critically examines the role of modern institutions as often being sources of trauma rather than healing. However, healing attempts also engage with the materials and landscapes of modernity. For instance, the car in *The Red Convertible* becomes a complex, modern symbol. It is a site of brotherly bonding but also the mechanical object associated with Henry Lamartine Jr.'s war trauma and eventual death. Characters use modern tools, cars, letters, urban jobs, to navigate their relationships and traumas, with ambiguous outcomes^[17]. This reflects Herman's observation that recovery is not a

linear triumph but a process fraught with setbacks, where the modern world presents both new forms of alienation and potential, albeit fragile, new avenues for agency and reconnection.

The recovery path, in its tension between tradition and modernity, culminates in the struggle to synthesize a coherent self from fragmented identities. This is central to the novel's structure of multi-voiced narratives. A character like Lulu Lamartine, who defiantly navigates personal relationships, political battles over land, and her deep, unwavering connection to traditional ways, embodies this synthesis. Her strength stems not from rejecting one for the other, but from a pragmatic and fierce integration of personal desire, political savvy, and cultural memory. Her resilience illustrates Herman's final stage of recovery: the survivor's ability to reengage with life with a renewed sense of purpose and meaning, even if that purpose is forged from the very conflicts between the old and the new. Therefore, the title may be reinterpreted not only as a specific traditional charm but as the ongoing, courageous attempt to create bonds of care, understanding, and survival across the ruptures of history and modernity.

4. Conclusion

As a highly representative literary masterpiece of Louise Erdrick, *Love Medicine* constructs a multidimensional and profound critical discourse system through its unique traumatic narrative technique, successfully completing a profound critique of the triple political level of American society. Firstly, the novel uses delicate and realistic strokes to launch a tearful accusation against the long-standing racial policies implemented by the US government. By depicting the physical and mental trauma suffered by Native Americans under policies such as racial discrimination, land grabbing, and cultural assimilation, the brutality and injustice of the US government's racial policies are blatantly presented to readers, making people deeply aware of the devastating impact these policies have brought to Native American communities. Secondly, the work boldly deconstructs cultural hegemony in depth. Under the wave of globalization, mainstream culture continues to erode the living space of peripheral cultures with its powerful influence. However, *Love Medicine* reveals the power manipulation and cultural violence behind cultural

hegemony by showcasing the unique charm, resilience, and struggle of indigenous culture under the pressure of cultural hegemony, breaking the narrative mode of mainstream culture's singularity and hegemony, sounding the alarm for the coexistence and prosperity of diverse cultures. Thirdly, the novel actively explores the survival strategies of indigenous cultures in the context of globalization. In the context of irreversible globalization, indigenous culture is facing unprecedented challenges and opportunities. The protagonists in *Love Medicine* constantly explore and try in trauma and difficulties, and in various ways, uphold and inherit their own ethnic culture, finding new survival paths and development possibilities for indigenous culture in the wave of globalization.

Erdrick demonstrated innovative spirit in literary creation, skillfully transforming the psychological mechanisms in Herman's theory into literary form experiments with her unique insight. Herman's theory deeply analyzes the impact of trauma on individual psychology and the process of trauma repair, while Erdrick integrates these profound insights from psychological perspectives into the narrative structure, character development, and plot setting of the novel. Through non-linear narrative time, fragmented narrative structures, and inner monologues, she vividly reproduces the distortion and reshaping of indigenous individuals' psychology caused by traumatic experiences, making trauma writing no longer just a simple record of painful experiences, but a carrier with strong cultural resistance. This writing strategy is like a sharp surgical knife, accurately analyzing various ills in American society, while also injecting new vitality and connotation into Native American literature. It greatly expands the expressive dimensions of North American indigenous literature, moving it from a single ethnic narrative to a broader field of social criticism. It also provides a valuable cross-cultural template for postcolonial trauma research. Postcolonial trauma research is dedicated to exploring the trauma and cultural impact suffered by oppressed nations under colonial rule. *Love Medicine* provides rich cases and theoretical insights for this research field with its unique perspective and profound connotation, promoting the continuous development of postcolonial trauma research in

cross-cultural contexts.

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